

Reviews

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Holly Berkley Fletcher, *The Missionary Kids: Unmasking the Myths of White Evangelicalism* (Broadleaf Books, 2025), 291 pages, \$26.

Written from an insider (albeit second generation) perspective, Holly Berkley Fletcher's book guides us, sometimes carefully and sometimes with less care, through an invisible but religiously venerated minefield: the missionary calling. Fletcher answers a question she never explicitly asks, "Are the children of missionaries also missionaries?" Her answer is a resounding no. Part confessional, part instructional, this text journeys through the complexities of those who have seen the underbelly of American evangelical missions, which Fletcher labels the most relentless and dogged pursuit of the religious conversion of the whole world (34).

Fletcher uses the term "third-culture." Readers unfamiliar with this term may find Fletcher's a disturbing introduction, rather like sifting through the ashes after a fire. For others, her critique may reinforce old tropes of Christian mission as cultural destruction, oppression, and religious enslavement. Even though Fletcher states that she does not wish to "diminish the good [missionaries] have done or disrespect any of them personally" (13), readers may find it hard to separate Fletcher's debunking the so-called "myth of evangelical missions" from the actual work of those they know in global service.

Fletcher admits to having grown up in a social structure she calls the “missionary bubble,” or “a temporary, imported, usually highly privileged world that lives inside [foreign] places” (77). This reality is often hidden from the sending church. In the past, the missionary compound was a physical reality for many reasons. Today the bubble is less physically present, but it is intimately related to class and social standing. In a sweeping condemnation, Fletcher categorizes all present-day American Christians, wherever they live, as having “bubble-wrapped themselves so tightly, it strangles their relationships with those outside their world...inhaling only what others of their insular communities exhale” (94). The author’s willingness to admit to the shame of having lived in the missionary bubble while growing up in another country and never learning the language or much of the culture has caused her to change her self-description from, “I’m from Kenya,” to saying that she was raised there. Such honesty among those raised third-culture is admirable when they are faced with the ever-awkward question, “Where are you from?”

If the reader can move beyond the snide comments and adolescent humor, some important instruction can be found. Especially for those, like me, who have invested heart and soul into participating with God’s priorities in the world, this is an important read. How often do any of us, much less missionaries, listen to our adult children? When do we listen to their perspectives and interpretations of what we did or valued? How have our vocations impacted the lives of our offspring? As one of my own kids told me, “I loved everything about being a missionary kid except for the mission part.” This book falls into the genre of a “tell-all,” reflecting some of the pain and snarkiness that might be found in a similar work by the adult children of any parents of notoriety. Traumatic childhood stories are not limited to “missionary kids” (also known as MKs). Good, godly parenting, wherever it takes place, requires de-mythologizing the Christian life: we know that struggles happen to Christ’s followers, even when we’d like to pretend otherwise. Fletcher’s book is an appeal for those of us who claim to be in Christ: she asks us to look straight at truth and still recognize grace.

The book is divided into three sections, each dedicated to debunking a major myth of the missionary life: the myth of calling, the myth of multiculturalism, and the myth of saints. Another myth that could have been expanded is that of the modern messiah briefly alluded to in her sardonic comment, “Whatever did the Lord do before there were American Christians?” (34).

Missing completely is the reminder that God is still at work in the world bringing restoration and order back into our personal and collective forms of chaos. God's global mission is not over; we (the church and all its missionaries) just need to be constantly re-converted. Of all the possible creative ways to accomplish divine purposes, the Creator continues to use flawed jars of clay. This is no excuse for laziness, lack of accountability, or the infliction of trauma on anyone, particularly children, whether our own or others, but is a call to reflection. I heartily agree with the author's statement that "missionaries who put their kids in traumatizing or dangerous situations are not 'heroes of the faith.' They are bad parents" (53).

Fletcher ends with a final word of hope. "I believe God invites us to trade control for faith, power for community, certainty for peace" (260). Following Fletcher's thread of hope will serve as a good word of warning for all parents in every missional situation, wherever parenting takes place.

PAUL H. DE NEUI

Leah Libresco Sargeant, *The Dignity of Dependence: A Feminist Manifesto* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2025), 219 pages, \$28.

In *Dignity of Dependence*, Leah Libresco Sargeant asks how we can live in a world that is "the wrong shape for women." In a New York Times podcast, Ross Douthat asks whether the workplace is "not fitted for women." Sargeant responds, "I think it's hostile to yours, too, Ross, because you are a human being who will one day die." In both the interview and this book Sargeant argues that when personhood is defined as autonomy, women are the first to be left out. Autonomy, she notes, is understood as freedom from others' needs.

Sargeant frames her argument for dependence in chapter 2 around the story of Robert Rice, a seventy-nine-year-old man trapped by a California snowstorm. Due to the snow, he was unable to back out of his driveway to visit his dying wife. In an act of desperation, he posted on Facebook, "This is embarrassing for me to ask for help." Neighbors quickly responded with shovels and a tractor to dig him out. Sargeant writes, "We are called not to accommodate dependence as a brute, unpleasant fact, but to knit dependence deeply into our understanding of what it means to be a human being." Care is not something earned, despite Robert Rice's hours spent trying to dig out his car with arthritic hands. Giving and receiving care are woven into what it means to be human.

For Sargeant, motherhood becomes the site from which humanity rediscovers that creaturely life is constituted by dependence. Women are welcomed into corporate life only insofar as they can perform according to norms shaped around male bodies. This often requires women to suppress or minimize the biological realities of reproduction: pregnancy, breastfeeding, recovery, even the rhythms of their menstrual cycles. These interruptions reveal that flourishing and dependence are inseparable. As Sargeant writes, “Children pierce illusions of autonomy.” When a need is “intimately bound to us,” like an infant in the womb or a nursing child, Sargeant argues that such moments teach us what it means to be human.

“The human project is better understood not as self-creation, apart from the world, but as apprehension of the world, with the self being the one to grow and change to harmonize with what is true,” Sargeant writes. Freedom for men and women alike depends on an “honest account of the human person.” Dependence is constitutive rather than accidental. Vulnerability is not a temporary condition of childhood, illness, or disability, but an ontological marker of creatureliness. Selfhood is received through the networks of care and relationships that sustain us. Communion, being given to and sustained by one another, is not a metaphor but a posture of human life.

Sargeant’s emphasis on dependence exposes the fragility of the care networks that hold our lives together. Women care for children who are home sick from school, elderly parents, and children and adults with disabilities. While women may have a unique relationship to care because of reproductive realities, they do not bear a unique responsibility for care work. This invisible labor performed by women has no place within a market-driven liberal society. Sargeant seeks not to reject feminism altogether but to recover a vision of humanity grounded in mutual dependence.

Sargeant’s work reminds us that dependence is not a failure but is woven into the fabric of our common life. The Book of Common Prayer gives voice to Sargeant’s vision: “O God, your unfailing providence sustains the world we live in and the life we live...grant that we may never forget that our common life depends upon each other’s toil” (64). This prayer articulates two central claims that shape Sargeant’s book. The first is an admission of our neediness and creatureliness before God. It is only by God’s providence, not our expertise, that this fragile world is sustained. Second, life together depends upon one another’s toil, not on independence.

Sargeant's book matters now because it restores the embodied, relational account of the human that our culture has forgotten. If Dorothy Sayers asked a century ago whether women are human, Sargeant asks a deeper question: who counts as a person at all?

LINDSEY GIBSON

Cleophus J. LaRue, ed. *This Is My Story: Testimonies and Sermons of Black Women in Ministry* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 216 pages, \$15.

This Is My Story is more than a book. It is a sacred encounter with sister-friends. This inspiring collection of testimonies and sermons by thirteen Black women in ministry offers readers an invitation to be a part of an up close and personal experience of God's faithfulness through the many challenges, obstacles, and wounds of ministry. Each chapter pairs an authentic narrative with a sermon not from a pedestal, but from the lived journey of struggle, surrender, joy, and faith by fire.

The testimonies are deeply transparent, courageous, and raw. Cokiesha Bailey's story opens the book with her honest wrestling between pleasing God and honoring her minister father who disapproved of women preachers. Her touching testimony moves through transformation toward reconciliation over years, culminating in her father's public apology and affirmation of her ministry call. Others, like Claudette Copeland's, reflect on what it means to be "all dressed up with nowhere to go"—gifted, prepared, yet repeatedly denied opportunity by the institutional "power grid." These stories are not easy, but they are necessary. They reflect the unique challenges Black women navigated then and now: the intersection of gender, race, and calling within spaces that may affirm in word but resist in practice.

What makes this book so rich is the way the sermons grow out of the stories. The sermons are theologically strong on their own, but alongside the testimonies they become embodied truths of experience and wisdom. Alyson Diane Browne's sermon "Straighten Up!" speaks to her own journey from burnout to healing in a creative first-person narrative in the voice of the bent-over woman Jesus healed on the Sabbath. Deborah Blanks preaches "Telling God Where It Hurts," not as biblical theory but as someone who has ministered in spaces of injustice and communal pain.

Although the collection represents different backgrounds, contexts, denominations, and ministry vocations, there are recurring themes: the

cost of obeying God's call in the face of resistance, the power of perseverance, the ache for visibility, the necessity of allies—both women and men—and a passion for serving the Lord that refuses to die.

Although at times painful to read, each chapter is a celebration and declaration insisting Black women are not fringe contributors to the Church; rather, they are central to its witness. The Church is richer when their stories are told, their sermons are heard, and their leadership is honored. *This Is My Story* is a book for such a time as this. It will affirm every woman called to ministry and seeking her way through the obstacle course of male bias and power. It will encourage those who are weary in the journey not to give up, because you are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. And it will challenge every reader to listen more deeply to the wounds and the witness of Black women in ministry—sisters God has indeed called and gifted.

TAMMY LONG

Wylin D. Wilson, *Womanist Bioethics: Social Justice, Spirituality, and Black Women's Health* (New York University Press, 2025), 215 pages, \$30.

Within the field of theological bioethics, modern bioethics—particularly the principlist framework advanced by Tom Beauchamp and James Childress—has been subject to sustained critique. While many of these critiques are substantive and worthwhile, they often remain incomplete, offering only deconstructive commentary without proposing constructive alternatives. In *Womanist Bioethics: Social Justice, Spirituality, and Black Women's Health* Wylin Wilson not only offers a critique of modern bioethics from the perspective of the Black church in America but also takes the vital and often neglected step of constructing an alternative framework. In doing so, Wilson develops a womanist bioethical paradigm capable of liberating the “evolution of mainstream American bioethical discourse and practice” (5).

Wilson organizes the book into three broad movements. The first, comprising the opening three chapters, focuses on historical development. Across these chapters, she traces the implications of American chattel slavery for identity, vulnerability, and social status before examining the institutional responses of Black hospitals and the Black church as they sought to address the enduring effects of slavery on Black health and embodiment.

From this historical foundation, Wilson turns to theoretical construction in the next three chapters. Here she undertakes her most significant constructive work, articulating the scope and orientation of womanist bioethics. She argues that bioethics remains an underutilized resource for mediating the relationship between race and health, asserting that “adopting an expansive approach to bioethical analysis with insights from social scientific approaches that account for social structures and relationships paves the way for a braver, bolder, better bioethics” (84). Having established bioethics as the critical site for such engagement, Wilson then introduces the concept of womanism and, through a synthetic integration of womanism and bioethics, produces a distinctively womanist bioethical framework.

In the final section, Wilson turns to practical application, demonstrating how womanist bioethics might materialize in concrete contexts. The first of her two case studies addresses rural health, a topic that receives scant attention in bioethical literature. Wilson persuasively argues that womanist bioethics can “yield practical solutions for practitioners who confront diverse clients and problems associated with geographic location and layered oppression” (136). The second case study focuses on Black maternal health, showing how womanist bioethics can reframe and reorient longstanding priorities in ways that address the persistent injustices embedded in current practices of Black maternal care.

Wilson’s book balances well the dual aims of critique and reconstruction, holding together a penetrating analysis of bioethics’ limitations with a vision for its renewal. To that end, two principal strengths in *Womanist Bioethics* merit attention. First, as aforementioned, Wilson offers a unique approach in that she is both critical and constructive, a rare achievement within theological bioethics. Second, Wilson’s prose remains theologically robust while maintaining accessibility. She has written an academic text that can be read by both scholars and practitioners, making it a contribution capable of instigating substantive change within both the Church and academic bioethics.

The following observation should not be read as a critique of the book, but rather as an invitation for further development in future scholarship. The framework Wilson constructs is particularly well-suited to addressing bioethical questions at the societal or communal level; indeed, the book articulates a compelling approach to public and population health bioethics. Yet public and population health are not the only modes within the broader field of bioethics, which also encompasses such subdisciplines as clinical medical ethics and research ethics. Toward her conclusion, Wilson

gestures toward clinical ethics committees as a potential site for engaging ethical issues within healthcare. However, it remains somewhat unclear how a womanist bioethical framework might operate in clinical practice.

This critique, however, should not be understood as detracting from the quality or persuasiveness of Wilson's *Womanist Bioethics*. The book remains a significant and timely contribution, not only for bioethicists who critically engage the discipline but also for clinicians and practitioners of the Christian Church seeking to discern how the resources within their own communities can be mobilized toward the work of justice and the flourishing of all involved.

JACKSON MCNEECE

Marcus A. Mininger, *Impossible to Be Restored? Temptation and Warning in the Epistle of Hebrews* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 64, Apollos; B&H Academic, 2025), 174 pages, \$30.

The “epistle” to the Hebrews is notorious as a linguistically sophisticated and rhetorically complex text. It is lofty in its theology, makes frequent use (through both citation and allusion) to the Old Testament, and resists attempts to locate its historical situation. In the face of these daunting challenges, Marcus Mininger engages one narrow aspect of the letter’s message: the nature of the temptation the letter’s audience was facing and the meaning of the author’s warning in response to that temptation, particularly as found in Hebrews 6:1–6. By clarifying this narrow issue, Mininger hopes to shed light on the broader argument of the letter and show that “Hebrews has much to teach us all, not only by *what* it says but also by *how* it says it” (162, emphasis original).

In contrast to those who seek to reconstruct the so-called “original context” of the letter in order to discern its meaning, Mininger joins those who claim to approach the text with “interpretive restraint” (11). Thus, he pursues an exposition of the “internal thought-world” (13) of the letter, rooted in an understanding of first-century Jewish practice and the theological resources of the Old Testament in order to show how this logic helps to make the nature of the temptation and warning clearer.

After rehearsing the primary lines of interpretation on the temptation (ch. 2) and warning (ch. 3), Mininger turns to the heart of his argument (chs. 4–7) where he reexamines the language and imagery present in Hebrews 6:1–4 in order to lead toward his key insight that the primary

rhetorical dynamic in Hebrews is the relationship between the old and new covenants, where the former *leads to* the latter such that one cannot return to or choose the old covenant “without rejecting the inherent value of *both* covenants” (142, emphasis original). This case is made by illustrating three theological concepts. First, Mininger examines how metaphors of food (Heb 5:12–14) and foundation (6:1) are not synonymous but accomplish different tasks (ch. 4). Second, he explores the lists in Heb 6:1b–2 and 6:4–5 to show how the former exemplifies characteristics of the old covenant while the latter shows elements of the new (ch. 5). Third, he demonstrates, using this insight, why believers cannot simply return to the old covenant (ch. 6–7).

Essential to his argument in these chapters is the necessity of carefully and clearly understanding the words in the text, unclouded by interpolation. For example, he argues that the “baptisms” (plural form, as translated in the NRSV) in 6:2 are not Christian baptism (always in the singular) but rather the ritual washings characteristic of first-century Judaism. Similarly, he suggests that the “repentance” in Hebrews 6:4 is in fact repentance and standing *achieved through the old covenant*, and *not* repentance in Christ.

In two final chapters, Mininger relates his argument back to the overarching discourse of the letter (ch. 8). Then he offers thoughts on what Hebrews, as a letter, might reveal about the audience’s situation. He also delves into the pastoral response being offered to invested parties, including Christians today (ch. 9).

More than once in the book (as on p. 105), Mininger acknowledges that “the general consensus of past scholarship is correct,” though perhaps for reasons different than are claimed. Thus, the question necessarily emerges: Has he offered anything truly new or simply repackaged old insights with different nuance and emphasis? Has he merely found a new way of arriving at the same place?

Nevertheless Mininger offers a clear and careful analysis of Hebrews that highlights a (or perhaps the) primary line of thought within the letter in fresh ways. In particular, his analysis offers a reminder to any interpreter to resist reading meaning into the words of the text, but to discover their meaning within their own context (see “baptism” above). In this way, Mininger’s work offers pastors both a helpful presentation of *what* Hebrews says as well as modeling an approach to *how* it says it that can be transferred to the interpretation of other texts.

LUKE S. OLIVER